

Yotam Ottolenghi | Simple yet delicious

It's a Long Story

Edwina Throsby: It's hard to remember what we used to cook before Yotam Ottolenghi burst into our culinary consciousness. His brand of colourful, vegetable-based food has transformed kitchens and tables the world over. Born in Jerusalem, Yotam was set to pursue an academic career after completing a master's degree in comparative literature. However at age 30 he decided to move to London to become a chef, and his future was rewritten. His London restaurants have become cult destinations, his cookbooks are on everyone's shelves, he's a TV host, he's one of the world's most famous gay dads, and he's one of the loveliest people you're likely to meet.

Yotam Ottolenghi, welcome to the Sydney Opera House.

Yotam Ottolenghi: Thank you.

ET: It's good to have you back.

YO: I know it's been five years I, think since I came here last. Yeah.

ET: Well, you're always welcome. So, I would like to take you right back to the beginning of your life and the family that you were born into. Which was quite sort of an unusual family if you think about where everybody was coming from and the diversity of that. Your dad was Italian. Your mum was German but you were born in Jerusalem. How did that come about? How did they meet?

YO: My parents are first generation, generation immigrants. So, they both came with their families to Israel. But it was Palestine, then. In 1939, just before the war in Europe had started. But as little kids. So, essentially, they grew up in Israel as Israelis. And I think they met at the university in Jerusalem in the 1950s when they were both students. Yeah. I mean, it's, it's an unusual story in the sense that they have managed both families managed to leave Europe just before the war. So, we don't have many terrible Holocaust stories in our family. So, and that is actually really, really interesting because when I talk to my parents and I speak to my grandparents, their kind of last-minute escape from Europe was, was pretty remarkable and forward thinking, if you think about it. But, but my parents grew up in kind of in the country in its first years.

ET: So did your grandparents leave their countries Germany and Italy in anticipation of a war and persecution?

YO: I wouldn't say that they had that clarity of vision. I think they felt that it was time to go. I don't know if they knew the war was coming. But they felt that it was getting very uncomfortable. And they thought that it was necessary to leave. And at a price because they were kind of established families. And one of the reasons why I think they could leave was because they were pretty middle class, so they could afford to go and do this big jump and come over to Palestine.

ET: And why did they choose Palestine out of all of the countries that they could have gone to?

YO: My grandparents were Zionists. And I think they were Zionists, in theory, supporters from a distance. But once it became uncomfortable in Europe, they decided to move. But

from four grandparents their siblings have gone all over. So, some went to America. Some stayed in Europe. Some came to Palestine. So, they kind of, they went into different directions.

ET: And how did the politics evolve throughout the development of Israel and Palestine? Was that?

YO: The family politics, or?

ET: Yeah. You know. Their, their, their sort of broad politics, did their Zionism soften?

YO: Well, for the generation of my grandparents I would say that they were my. They were pretty Zionist throughout. On my mum's side, the German family were leftwing Zionists. So, they were always kind of on the left margin of Zionism. On my dad's side, they were not so political, I would say. I mean, I can't even tell you what they voted. They were just, you know, living their lives. At some point, for Zionists, is a way of defining yourself when you're outside Israel. The word Zionism, Zionists become a little bit less relevant because you're there and you're kind of living your life. So, it's something quite intentional. It's at the start of the process. But once you are there, it's, it's just part of your daily life. And yeah. They were part of the project. And they did different things. They're definitely from the founding generation of the nation. My grandfather from on my mum's side was a professor of mathematics and he was one of the people set up the Weizmann Institute in, in Rehovot which is one of the universities in Israel. And my grandmother on that side was, was in the Mossad, in the Secret Service for many years. And so, they were kind of formidable, you know, very kind of established people.

ET: Yeah. So, you were born in 1968 and grew up in Jerusalem in the 70s. What was Jerusalem like, then? What was the Jerusalem of your childhood?

YO: I would say one thing. It was a much less fraught place. I think soon after the 1960s, 67 war in which Israel occupied the West Bank in Jerusalem, there was this period I would call it the shock period between. Which included the 1970s and kind of half the 80s, where people didn't know where this was actually going. And it was, and the kind of naivety, especially, on both sides, I think, believing things could go in all sorts of directions. So, it was pretty, as far as I experienced it – I'm sure Palestinians might not have experienced it in exactly in such a way – it was pretty peaceful. And we used to spend a lot of our weekends going to the West Bank, to east Jerusalem. I remember going to Jericho, which was this heaven of beauty and smells and flavours. And one of the memories that I've got is that Jerusalem is high up on the hills and Jericho is like.

ET: It's below sea level, isn't it?

YO: Yeah. It's 100 metres under sea level. So, essentially, you can take a bicycle and literally not even peddle all the way down, down from Jerusalem at 800 metres high to, to Jericho which is 100 metres under sea level. It was the most beautiful bicycle ride through desert, seeing Bedouin tents and then arriving in this oasis which was full of, of citrus fruit and bougainvilleas beautifully flowering. It was, it was almost tropical. And we'd sit out there in restaurants and street restaurants and have really delicious Palestinian food.

ET: What sort of things would you eat?

YO: I remember distinctly the smell of grilled meats. Lamb, in particular. I'm sure that was the, predominantly the meat that we would have, or maybe chicken. And a lot of beautiful

salads and kind of what you imagine as a Palestinian or Lebanese mezze. Kibbeh and salads and tahini-based salads and wonderful delicious very vegetable-heavy food. And then, desserts, you know.

ET: Oh, the honey –

YO: Yeah. Full of syrups and aromatic flavours, etcetera. But luckily for us, we didn't have to do the climb back up to the hill, back to Jerusalem. My mum used to come with a car. Used to pack the bikes back in the car and take us back home to Jerusalem.

ET: That's very sensible. So, in your home growing up, who did the cooking?

YO: Both my parents did the cooking. They're both good cooks. My dad, with his Italian background, used to cook as Italians love their food, right? And they love *their* food [laughter]. So, there's very little kind of scope for, for change or for innovation, I think, on that front. But my dad cooked brilliantly. He used to make polentas and pastas and beautiful cooked vegetables and, and still does. My mother had a German background. So you can imagine more central European food. Cabbages and potatoes, quite a bit of pork, which was always a bit controversial growing up in Jerusalem. But also, she was a bit more adventurous. So, she would get all sorts of cookbooks and try foods from all over the world. So, both of them were really good cooks. And there was always an appreciation of good food. Whether it was at home or we'd go out or we would travel. I think, I really benefitted from them both being foodies. I mean, the term didn't exist at the time. But they were very into food.

ET: I wish it didn't exist now, actually.

YO: Yeah, exactly.

ET: So, how old were you when you learnt to cook? Did your parents sort of teach you? Were you in the kitchen with them or?

YO: No, I wasn't that kind of boy. Many chefs describe their childhood as kind of a period of almost like, what's the word? They describe their childhood as like as being apprentices to their parents or grandparents. But in our house, my parents did most of the cooking. I used to watch and I was very into my food. I was extremely into my food. I loved eating. And to the extent, they made fun of me that I was greedy and this and that. My birthday presents were to go to restaurants and get the foods that I couldn't normally get. But I wasn't so into the actual cooking. I do remember, though, that I had a kid's cookbook that I cooked from on occasion and it had all sorts of funny things. One of the dishes I will never forget was the equivalent of a sausage roll. But it was kosher. And so, you had to use a kind of a chicken sausage or a turkey sausage and wrap it in pastry which was vegetable based because you couldn't mix, obviously, the dairy and the meat. And it was, it was really weird. It was called Moses in a Basket.

ET: Oh..

YO: Yeah, I know. It was..

ET: Sounds kind of cannibalistic.

YO: A little bit sinister. And I don't know who gave it that name. But anyway, it was, it was delicious, no doubt. But yeah. I'll never forget that one. But I didn't really engage in serious cooking until I left home and went to university which was in the early 1990s. And I

realised, I think, like many other students realise is that if you're not going to cook for yourself, nobody will cook for you. It's a harsh reality, it's banal, but it's true. Luckily my partner and I lived very close to one of the, the markets in Tel Aviv. So, I remember going and shopping and actually it was the first time I really engaged in food. I mean, rather than just eating it. I remember going to the Carmel Market in Tel Aviv and picking my vegetables and cheese. They had this amazing cheese counter with lots of fresh cheeses, you know, feta style. And getting all those and fresh pitas and bring them home on Friday afternoon and cooking and getting friends over and cooking for them. And the whole experience of feeding became such a nourishing experience. I thought oh, I've discovered something. I can make people really happy by, by you know, doing the thing, things that I love doing. So, that was, that was really a eye-opening moment. The ability to feed people and get that kind of recognition.

ET: So, just going back to your childhood. You, you were a middle child with a older sister and a younger brother. What were the dynamics between the three of you growing up?

YO: My sister is quite a bit older than, than me and my brother. So, she was always kind of a slightly separate entity in our household. We, my brother and I were about two years apart. And she was more than five years our senior. So, we used to torment her quite a bit. We were, especially. I think I was the lead on that. I was, she was the kind of older sister that didn't really want the, the, the younger brothers, you know, going into her room in her teenage years and, and rummaging through her stuff. And knocking and barging in whenever she had friends over. I mean, I think we were pretty annoying little monkeys. And my brother were very close. We spent a lot of time together as, as kind of as two boys often do. That was kind of the dynamic. It really shifted. I mean, at some point my, my brother and I were, were drawn apart a bit when we reached kind of mid-adolescence. And actually I became even closer to my sister. When she left home and went to university and I was becoming. I was either 15 to 17, I became, I would spend time with her in Tel Aviv. She had an apartment and it felt very grown up to go and spend you know, days there. And we, we grew quite close while my brother felt a little bit little and left behind a bit.

ET: You and your brother both did time in the Israeli Defence Forces.

YO: Yeah.

ET: You in intelligence and he in a fighting unit. And that, of course, ended in real tragedy.

YO: Yeah.

ET: How did your brother die?

YO: My brother died in an accident where what you call friendly fire when one unit was not informed about a drill. And his unit was attacking them. And the soldier was just not informed that this is going to happen. He just thought it was a real proper attack and he just defended himself and killed my brother. And it was a big deal because things like that are not supposed to happen in peacetime. And, obviously, it really kind of threw our lives to pieces, immediately. He was a beautiful young man in his early 20s and it was just like that from, from one day to the next.

ET: How did your family react?

YO: Everyone very differently. I suppose my sister and my mother were mourning in the particular, in the familiar feminine way. They would talk about quite a lot over the years

and still do. Also, with his girlfriend. He had a girlfriend that remained very close to us. And my father and I, I think we closed up in a, in a kind of a masculine typical way of dealing with that, which is not really talking. And but I guess everybody did what they needed to do. I guess it's still painful and we still have yearly memorial days for him when we all get together and talk about him. It's just part of our lives now, really.

ET: Has it influenced your decisions in any way?

YO: Maybe inadvertently I was—me being a young man and I wasn't completely out to my family, not my dad. When my, when my brother died it made my existence even more difficult because I always thought I was bearing quite a lot of responsibility for my parents' well-being on my shoulders. Which is already my quite my tendency as a middle child to take responsibility over the well-being of everybody around me. I think that increased the pressure. I wouldn't go as far as to say that that's why I left. In 1995 I went, I moved to Amsterdam and I haven't lived in Israel since. But I stayed very close to my parents and to my family. And eventually completely came out and there is none of that between us. But I think it probably was a bit easier to take that distance and move away for a while as I did about, I would say four years, or three or four years after he died.

ET: Your sister, I read, has described your family as one of – quoting here – one of high, high stated expectations.

YO: That's pretty accurate. Yeah.

ET: So you studied in Tel Aviv. But then, you, you went to Amsterdam. What was it about Amsterdam that attracted you?

YO: Well, I, my boyfriend at the time and I just decided it. So, I was about to finish my Master's. I studied literature and philosophy at the university. And I, I, I was about to complete my studies. I still had to write my dissertation, but I could do that anywhere. And we just decided to as I'd never taken proper time off. After I had finished my military service, I went to university and we just wanted to take a bit of time off. So, we moved to Amsterdam in kind of an aimless way, kind of not really knowing exactly where we were doing. And we rented an apartment and I had a little desk in the attic where I did my dissertation. The years in Amsterdam are kind of weird couple of years. Because on the one hand, I had that mission to finish my dissertation. But on the other hand, I had a lot of free time. So, we used to go out a lot, we did a lot of clubbing and going out. And Amsterdam, obviously, is notorious for, for its drugs and all the rest. So, it was kind of like I've kind of sunk these two years. I did manage to something, obviously, to write the dissertation. I did manage to apply myself to, to a certain degree. But I didn't really do that much those two years. But it was great fun, I have to say.

ET: I can imagine. Amsterdam in the 90s really was. And what did you do your dissertation in?

YO: My department was the comparison literature department. But I was more interested in philosophy and art. So I did my dissertation about representation in art. Particularly in photography. I was trying to figure out or trying to rummage through all sorts of discussions about what does a photographic representation of reality do. And this was part of the discussions. And, that have been going on about photography since its inception in the 1830s and carried on to the 1980s, which people couldn't quite figure out what a photograph was.

ET: And if it could be art and what an artist brought to a photograph.

YO: Yeah. And there was kind of like it was almost treated initially like a natural object. Like a, almost like a something like an imprint on another object. Like a fossil. the mediation of the artist, the photographer, was what we were discussing. How much of an impact does the artist or the photographer has over a picture? And whether it's a natural object or it's more like a drawing in which you kind of, there, there's definitely nothing kind of natural about it. And it was kind of interesting but I think as I was doing my work, I also felt that is extremely esoteric. I felt that I was just writing to myself and my supervisor, literally.

ET: Yeah. That's pretty much the experience of writing a dissertation.

YO: Yeah. And I remember when I was, when I was about. When I finished my dissertation, finally, and I thought it was very good. And you know, I did what I needed to do like a good boy, I completed my studies. I remember the exact place where I printed four of five copies of my dissertation. I'm sitting on one of the beautiful canals. And I went and got all these copies and they smelt from print. And it was just, you know, it was wonderful. And I sent a copy to my supervisor and one to my parents and a couple more to friends and family. And to this day, I'm sure that nobody's read it [laughter]. I'd like to assume that my supervisor read it because she gave me a mark. But I think nobody else on this planet read it. And that was the result of two years of pretty hard work. And I think this was the, this is the kind of the crux of the matter, why I left academia and moved to food because it's like the true opposite of the spectrum in terms of the immediate gratification of feeding people as opposed to writing dissertations for people.

ET: Right.

YO: And, and I just felt like this is just not giving me what I need, you know.

ET: But, you know, you do, you do style a lot of your own photographs.

YO: I do.

ET: For your, your books.

YO: Yeah.

ET: Do, do you draw on any of your studies when you're thinking about that?

YO: Indirectly, I guess, I do. I think I'm a firm believer that everything that you've done makes you a rounder and more interesting person. That, obviously, affects what, everything else that you do. I definitely don't regret going to university and studying. But for a fraction of a second I did consider this as a career. And I think it's, it just wasn't for me, very clearly. And, and I do remember, one of the first jobs that I had in a kitchen was as a pastry chef. It was before I was even being paid I was just a lower apprentice in a restaurant. I had like a couple of hours and I just tried to make this brownie. And I made a brownie which is swirled together with a blondie mix and, and it was very 1990s. I just sent it out to the waiters to just try and tell me what they thought. And they were all, all you know, full of praise. They said this is one of the best brownies that I've ever had. And the contrast between the reaction about something that I'd just spent 20 minutes making as opposed to something that took two years was so stark that I thought I can never go back to university.

ET: So, I mean, before you were making brownies, you'd moved to London, actually, to study at Le Cordon Bleu.

YO: I did, yeah. Well, actually, this was while I was at the Cordon Bleu. This was the kind of the evening jobs that I looked for a while I was learning at Cordon Bleu during the day.

ET: Were there reasons beyond instant gratification of praise that made you lean towards food over any of the other things that you could have pursued? Not that instant gratification and praise isn't good enough.

YO: Well, I found cooking is some, a way for me to escape a very busy mind. Because I do have a very busy mind. And university or journalism which were the two careers that I was considering at the time, didn't give me that break, you know. I just kept on working with my head too much. And I found it really quite exhausting. And I remember that what I enjoyed about cooking is the fact that I could just switch off. I could switch off whether I was cooking for dinner friends that came over or whether I was doing mise en place in a restaurant for service. I mean, a restaurant could be a very stressful environment but it's stressful in a very different way. It's very physical. It's very intense. But once you go home you leave it all behind, you know.

ET: Yeah.

YO: The day is over. Which is the exact opposite of all sorts of other careers that were possible, you know, in my kind of horizon. So yeah. That was really the attraction. The idea that I could do something that I love. That I could do something physical. And I didn't pay the same price of overdoing it in my head. And I still feel like that. The kitchen is where I find a lot of joy. Sometimes, on a Sunday night when the kids have gone to bed and Karl, my husband, goes up to watch TV, I, I go and I make pancakes or crepes and freeze them for the week and put them in the freezer which I give to the kids sometimes for breakfast. And I put the music on or I put a podcast on and I just make crepes for like three hours. And I find it the most relaxing things I think I can do.

ET: I think cooking as relaxation is something that is really underappreciated. I'm wondering whether that's going to be sort of wrapped into the mindfulness movement that we're seeing at the moment, you know.

YO: Well, it should. I mention this example of making crepes because that is something that I can do every, every Sunday or every other Sunday. I know exactly what I'm doing. I'm not cooking dinner for friends that needs preparation. All I need is my flour, my eggs, and my milk. And, and my frying pan. And then, I just have a great time just doing something very repetitive. But with ingredients that I love and I can smell and I'm preparing feeding the kids for the whole week.

ET: That's a really nice thing. I think there's a cookbook there, Yotam. Mindful crepe making.

YO: Yeah.

ET: So having finished at Cordon Bleu and worked in various kitchens around London, you met Sami Tamimi and that was really a kind of pivotal friendship for you, right?

YO: Yeah. So, Sami Tamimi, I met him in London in 1998 and, and I was. Or 1999, possibly. I have worked in a few restaurants and I specialised in, in patisserie, so I became a pastry chef. And I wasn't quite sure where. I was looking. I was in between jobs and I was looking

for someone to hone in on my experiences, experience as a pastry chef and learn more. And I came across, I was actually just riding on the street on my scooter one day and I saw this beautiful window with wonderful looking cakes and brownies and tarts. And I thought I want to work in this place. It was called "Baker and Spice". And I literally just knocked on the door and walked in. And as soon as I walked in, I saw even how much more beautiful it was than just looking through the window. And Sami, whom I didn't know at the time, was there. And he was cooking. He was in charge of the savoury food and I said to him, Oh, I would like to drop my CV here because I would love to work here. And he said, yeah, you can give it to me. And we just got chatting and he. And is very. It, it really quickly transpired that we were both from Jerusalem. That he was a Palestinian and that we were both born in the same year and had a lot in common. He was also gay and I mean, there was just, we just had tonnes in common. But we haven't really met up until that moment although our lives were really kind of a massive parallel.

ET: You must have come close to meeting dozens of times, I imagine.

YO: Yeah. Because he moved from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv right about the same time as I did and we had people that we knew in common. But no, we hadn't met. And so we met then in London. And I got my job there, eventually. I was doing the pastries. He was in charge of the cooking the food. It was a beautiful place. And Ottolenghi in London is, is very much inspired and modelled on that place that we used to work in. And we formed kind of a bond, a friendship. And later on I started looking to open Ottolenghi while Sami was still working at "Baker and Spice" with Noam Bar, who is my ex-partner. And when we were ready to open I approached Sami and said, oh, maybe you'd join us. And he joined us as a third partner. That kind of became the founding group of, of Ottolenghi. And very much the kind of dialogue that Sami and I have had over the years, over food and through food and, and eating and having meals in different places. It's kind of formed the, the nature of the business.

ET: Aside from its sort of, you know, obvious success and you know, all of the, all of the kind of things that have been observed and written about the beauty of the two of you coming together to do this from a political perspective, as well, there's a lot that's been said about that. But I'm interested in, in how London gave you the opportunity for this.

YO: Yeah.

ET: And you know. I mean, you, you, you were saying earlier that, that your dad's Italian heritage made him quite rigid about what, what he thought was, you know, good cooking and not good cooking. But, but the U.K. you know, without you know. I mean, it does have a food identity. But its food identity is pretty grim. Did that give you a freedom to be able to bring in, you know, a bit of Italian cultural heritage, the kind of you know, Jerusalem, Middle Eastern kind of influences. All of that. Did opening in London give you a freedom to experiment with, with the food that you made?

YO: I often say that I think I was extremely lucky to have, to have landed in London.

I always found a misrepresentation of, of British culinary identities. I don't think it's that British food is dull or, or bad by definition. But there is a certain willingness with, of the Brits, which is very much part of the British identity kind of go along with the, with the joke. I'm not sure that other Northern European cuisines are so much better. But the Brits are just fine to kind of just take it on the chin and go on and move on and just say, yeah well, it's pretty crap. But you know, we do other things really well. And when we did open, Sami and

I, in, in the early 2000s in London. I mean, there couldn't be a better place. Because there, there's the level of acceptance and curiosity and interest and well-travelled people. No food chauvinism in the sense you would find in other places. This enabled us to both thrive, be successful, and really be kind of get a big hug by the establishment because of those tendencies. So I think it's a really brilliant place.

ET: That's right. It is such a multicultural city, as well. It's very accustomed to being open to different food cultures.

YO: Absolutely. Yeah.

ET: You and your taster, Claudine Boulstridge, who tastes all of your foods in the job that I'm sure is envied by millions. You, you've said that you use Ottolenghi as an adjective like, yeah, that's really Ottolenghi. What do you mean by that?

YO: Well, I've had to learn what it means for other people because to take that distance and be able to understand what people expect is not something that you can do just by, you know. It's not an introspective activity. So, I actually, over the years through Claudine in our conversations. Claudine lives in Wales, a fair distance from London. And tests every recipe that I publish. She gets the recipes pretty much, when I'm happy with them and I'm ready for a home cook to try them. And Claudine tests the recipes on her lovely family, on her children, on her husband, and her parents, everybody that lives around her in the little Welsh community. She's come to understand very well – because she has cooked every recipe – what it means to be an Ottolenghi recipe. And I know it now, too. A recipe would be, could be very solid, very delicious, extremely delicious. But is missing something. And that thing is what I would call Ottolenghi. That's it could be anything. It could be a twist. It could be a surprise. It could be a combination that nobody thought would work. It could be something that tasted really, really good but gives you a little, it makes you think.

ET: Think in a bad way, not a good way.

YO: No, in a good way. Think in a very good way. So, how did that actually happen? How did that work? It's just always something that is just slightly out of the ordinary. I remember once we were testing this recipe for pea soup. And it was just the best pea soup. It was just a vibrant green and delicious. It was just so good. And we were having, I said like that's just so worth publishing. And then, someone said, "But it's not very Ottolenghi." And I said, but what, but it's just really good. And so, and I understood exactly what that means. It would maybe disappoint someone that wants an extra accent or something unusual. And we made these really beautiful croutons that were based on goat's cheese and rolled up bread that you deep fried and sliced. And those went in and then, immediately it just kind of changed.

ET: It became Ottolenghi.

YO: Yeah. We Ottolenghified it.

ET: A lot of people talk about culture in food. But one of the things that doesn't get discussed so much is class, right?

YO: Yeah. Interesting.

ET: Yeah. You, you said, and I'm quoting you here, "We're in an age where people are using food more than in the past to define their social standing. It just happens to be food, now. But it'll be something else in the future." But I'm interested in, in, in the way that food can

be kind of wrapped up in what class you're from. Do you think that that's, that's something that does happen now and might be happening more?

YO: I think it manifests itself differently now. People of different classes have always eaten differently because it all depends on what you can afford to eat and what's available to you. But these days, what I find is that certain classes, you know, the, the Chattering middle-upper classes have embraced cooking. And other classes, the, the, the people that are not as affluent are not as well-versed in the conversation. And you cook less. So, it's not about, it's not about what or how you eat. It's about the nature of the food that you eat, whether you cook for yourself or not. And I find that division really disturbing because especially in the U.K. I know in Europe, it's different and I'm not quite sure how it works in Australia. More than 50%, I think I just read recently that 51 or 52% of the food consumed is prepared food. And all of the, the other 50% or 49% is—

ET: Cooked in kitchens.

YO: Is cooked in kitchens. And I think that is a big divider. And that is a massive divider. And to be able, to make people cook would be for me, the, the great equaliser. If everybody cooked then we would all eat pretty much similarly because food is cheaper to make these days than it used to be in the past. But I, I think it's a real shame that people don't cook. Not because there's anything wrong with ready meals. I'm, I would have one once in a while. But it's much more about the idea that there's something which, which is within your achievement. It's a skill, it's a life skill. It's a bit like a sport or anything else. It's something that it's great to have because it's part of life. I mean, and I think the more we distance ourselves from the real world, the more detached we are. And I think, and cooking is definitely something of the real world.

ET: Yeah. I mean, it's a very useful skill. It's like driving a car or something, you know.

YO: Yeah. And I think as people, you know, with our devices and we become detached. I mean, all these degrees of separation from, from our planet are, manifest themselves in so many ways in our reality. And cooking is one of them. And I would love people to have to cook not because they have to, and not because they, that someone is telling them to do that. But just because it's a wonderful thing to be able to do.

ET: So, you've spoken about cooking for your family. How did you meet your husband, Karl?

YO: Karl and I met in a very gay way. We met at the gym one time. And we just got talking. Actually, we met at the gym but actually, we started talking at the bookshelf under the gym. He was—

ET: I heard a rumour you met self-help section.

YO: Well, he was in the self-help section. He was about to travel somewhere. He was working as a flight attendant and I just approached him and got started talking to him and that was in 2000. So, you know, a long time ago.

ET: And now, you have two little boys.

YO: Yeah. We have Max who is six years old and Flynn, three years old.

ET: So, you've written about how they came to be, Max and Flynn. You went through a variety of routes as gay parents to bring Max and Flynn about. I wonder if you wouldn't mind just sort of explaining to us what that path was?

YO: I'd have to make a very long story shorter. But so, Karl and I were. I mean, at first, it was really very much my agenda to have kids. I've always wanted and for a long time, I thought I wouldn't be able to. But I had a good childhood and I did want kids. And the first attempt at making that happen were through what we call co-parenting arrangements where I met women who wanted to have families which were made out of two families, extended families. And I thought that was a good solution to our, to our desire. And there were two arrangements. Once one was with a couple and then, another one was with a friend. And none of them worked but for different reasons. I mean, with the first couple it was a lesbian couple. We just couldn't figure out how we actually wanted to do it. We started scrambling over a child that we didn't even have. It was like a divorce settlement over a kid that didn't even exist, with visiting rights and all the rest. And the other time, we tried to get pregnant but we couldn't. We couldn't get pregnant.

ET: With a friend?

YO: With a friend. And what I found really interesting through the process. Is that I realised that in some ways the notion that we have to have a woman involved in, in the bringing about of our kids and raising our kids was slightly of the old perception of what gayness means. And I think for, for a very long time I thought of our kids would be missing an aspect or a part or something if they were not being raised by a woman as well as a man. Now, I almost look at it—shame is a big word, but I'm a little bit embarrassed about it because why did Karl and I not think that we can just raise kids on our own as two men? Because now, we do it and what we have it, and it feels very natural. I think we do a good job at it like any other couple raising children. But at the time, I thought there was something insufficient about us, you know.

ET: Well, you were buying into some pretty powerful gender stereotypes that are cross-cultural and ancient.

YO: Extremely ancient and I think still very prevalent. And you know, the mum concept is a very strong concept. But in a sense, I feel slightly embarrassed to, almost to say it, to say it out loud. You always think you're totally liberated and you don't think like that, as someone who's come out and lives their life as they think they should. But in a sense, I guess I have internalised certain perceptions and I did think that two gay, two men are not just good enough for a child. But then we went down the surrogacy route. And we had a surrogate and an egg donor in America. Two separate women. And we had Max in 2013. And Flynn in 2015. And it's been an incredible journey in the sense that we first realised we can do it on our own and that we, and that we did it on our own. And we discovered that it's just, it, it's a wonderful thing to do and it's also I'm very proud of our, our little family. I think we're doing it, we're doing well.

ET: And what's their relationship with food?

YO: I would have loved to say that they're the most adventurous eaters and they have elaborate, you know, preserved lemon for breakfast. That, that is not quite the case. I think on the spectrum, they're somewhere in the middle. So, they, they could be pretty good. And, you know, they eat vegetables and they love broccoli. They hate tomatoes. They never touch, you know, a raw tomato. They'll only eat it if it's cooked. They always pick out

parsley or anything green out of their food. But they're very happy to eat most of the things that we put on the table. It's kind of it's somewhere in the middle. But the thing that I'm very happy about is that Karl and I think we managed to take the anxiety out of the equation when it comes to the kids food, if they want to eat something or if they don't. We try not to put pressure on them. Sometimes, we do, more often than not, we don't.

ET: Sounds like an extremely normal family. Well, Yotam Ottolenghi, it's been such a pleasure talking to you. Thank you, so much, for coming in and having this chat.

YO: Thank you. It was a pleasure.